

SIX MILE PRAIRIE

by William Roseborough Harshaw

What is it? Where is it? Who ever heard of Six Mile Prairie? No one, save someone from within its borders, who finally slipped away into the great world outside, lived his life, did his work, lived on the sweet memories of his childhood and was forgotten by those among whom he had his birth.

A hundred and twenty five years ago, the prairie was a bit of sunlit beauty, hidden away down in Southern Illinois, rimmed about with a great, dark forest which rarely had been touched by the foot of man. Once in a while a trapper in search of wild game, came and went without so much as leaving a trace behind. Only the wild Indian lived in the midst of this forest, coming out once in a while to breathe the fresh air of the prairie and the sunshine, then disappeared from sight, to travel over its hills, penetrate its forests, leaving behind him abundant traces of his presence. Even until this day, the upturned soil brings to light the stone tip, with which he pointed his arrow and this, in turn, became the dangerous weapon with which he killed the food on which he lived. As to the first white man that discovered the beauty of the prairie, tradition is busy. This story is that a white man did once visit this spot and built a cabin in the forest just off to the west side of the prairie. Just who he was, or how long he remained, or what became of the cabin, there is a great silence. There are no living facts to verify the story.

This spot, renowned for its beauty, has been greatly changed by the process of the years. The great forests have disappeared before the axe and saw of the pioneer. Their disappearance opened the way for the plough and reaper of the farmer. The very name "Six Mile Prairie" indicates the size of the prairie, six miles long and three miles wide. That was the original prairie. Disappearing forests have enlarged the bounds. The prairie has lost none of its beauty by this transformation and expansion of its space. At least to one born there, it still remains one of the beauty spots of Illinois. The topography is peculiar. On either side of the prairie, rise two great mounds, the one on the west called "The Great Mound" and the other on the east called "Little Mound." As one looks at these mounds, one is led to wonder, if these mounds were not originally made by the hand of man, perhaps by some tribe of Indians in the early days, long before settlement was a thought, as a tribal tribute to the god whom they adored and worshipped, transforming the natural into the artificial, the beauty of the one into the beauty of the other. Between these mounds spread out the level plains, which in the summer time are covered at one time, by the green fields of corn and later by the waving fields of the ripening grain.

The Territory of Illinois was admitted to the Union as a state in 1818. The inhabitants, at that time, were widely scattered over the wide stretches of territory. There were some to be found in the extreme north and some others in the center. Then a great gap in the central part of the state which was almost wholly devoid of settled population. Then you reached a thin line of people spread along the line of the Mississippi River at the extreme. These were French in origin. It was not until the great Lewis and Clark expedition that they were captured and became actually a part of the state.

Now, Six Mile Prairie was located about sixty miles from the southern line of the state. About the

beginning of the century a few people had drifted into the vicinity from New England. The stories of fine soil and a new chance had drifted back to the East and a few people had sold their farms of rock and headed west to seize the opportunity. It was not until the territory had become a state, a little after the legal change, that there was an inflow of new population, entered and spread over the prairie and adjoining region. This people were lead by a colony from South Carolina. These people were Irish in origin. Their forbears had doubtless come from the "Emerald isle" and they had been attracted to South Carolina by the salubrious climate and fertile soil. Perhaps the climate more than anything else determined the place to which these people came. It was not long until they became uneasy. The presence and domination of human slavery created the uneasiness. They were Irish in origin and that meant they were thoroughly indoctrinated with the idea of liberty and merely the presence of the black, owned and used as property, made them rebellious. They determined to forsake the south. The opening of the Illinois Territory and the stories of its fine soil moved them to think and act.

Doubtless they had been forward looking enough to send investigators to have a look at the soil and the conditions. Evidently their report was favorable. Among these colonists, there were three brothers, David McClure, Riley McClure, and Samuel McClure. These three brothers seem to have been the leaders of the colony in its trek toward the north. They sold their land, prepared their goods; and in wagons, to which were attached oxen, they set out to find a new home and a home untouched by the presence of the "Black man in bondage."

They crossed the intervening states, carrying with them their chattels, their cows, their women folk and in due time came to the banks of the great river, near its junction with the Ohio. They crossed the river and began their journey across the low lands, which lay between the junction of the Mississippi and the Ohio. The soil was not of the best. Swamps impeded their journey. Most of the land was unattractive for the expecting settler. After they had made their way over this low land and waded through the swamps of some sixty miles, they drove their ox teams and their wagons out into Six Mile Prairie.

It looked like the Garden of the Gods, as it lay bathed in the golden sun of the afternoon. The weary journey was ended. They had reached the land of corn and wheat. They unhitched their oxen and camped for the night. The rising sun of the morning revealed to their rested eyes the fairest land that their eyes had yet seen, and they made their decision that here was what they sought and here they at once determined not to camp for the night but to stop and found the new home of the future.

Each settler entered a hundred and sixty acres of land. There they built their cabins in the edge of the forest, to get the benefit of the shelter, and yet close enough to have the land they wrought in the prairie.

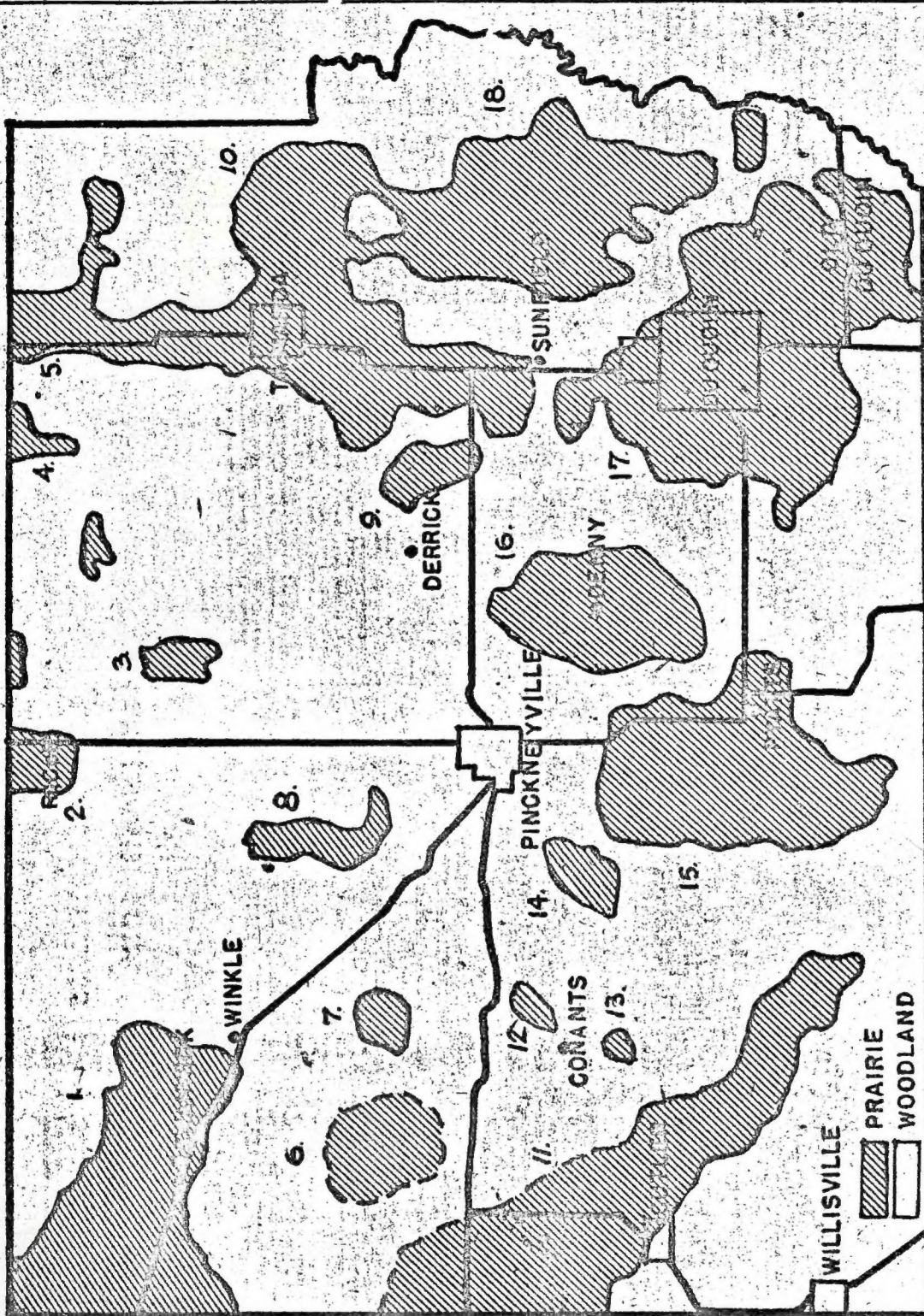
This settlement was peculiar in this respect, the leaders of the party were the three brothers of the colony of whom I have already spoken. Now, near to the same date, another three brothers, from somewhere in the east, had also come into the northern part of the prairie. Their names were Samuel Blair, William Blair and Thomas Blair. They came a little before, or a little after the others. I have no way of knowing exactly when they came. Thus the three brothers from the

south and the three brothers from the east united their hands and hearts and became the center of the settlement.

Of course, there were others in the goodly company that came from the old to become the nucleus of the new. The leaders, however, were these six men whose names I have mentioned. They were men of sterling quality of character. They were all pioneers. They had been stimulated by the same desire of build homes and develop a community. They had as yet no school, no church. They were men and women of stalwart Christian character and were determined to create homes and an atmosphere in which to raise their families in peace and prosperity.

In the early days of this colony, they must have made their cabins into schools and a church in which the children might be taught the fundamentals of an education and, to this end, they must have made their cabins the place where they might worship God. In that early time, they must have depended for the latter on the peripatetic minister who wandered from one settlement to another, preaching the gospel, doing the work of the church. Too much cannot be said in praise of these men that laid broad and deep the foundations of the church and, in a small way, ministered to the spiritual needs of these folks, who had not left their religion behind, nor the education of the children of the day. Both education and religion were the twin foundations of the community they had come hither to found and build.

Perry County's Early Prairies



Perry county, before the white man came, was made up of a series of prairies which got their names from first settlers, important incidents, etc. This map by Julius Swayne, a native of Du Quoin who is now on the faculty at Southern Illinois University, shows the more important regions. By number they include: 1—Grand Cote, 2—Round Prairie, 3—Hutchings, 4—Mud Prairie, 5—Upper Paradise, 6—Lost Paradise, 7—Brush Prairie, 8—Burnt Prairie, 9—Upper Holt's, 10—Johnson's (part of Paradise), 11—Six Mile Prairie, 12—Eaton's Prairie, 13—Conant's Prairie, 14—Galum, 15—Four Mile Prairie, 16—Lower Holt's Prairie, 17—Nine Mile, 18—Lower Paradise Prairie.